

More on cultural consecration and legitimization

Li asked a question in the seminar on Monday which I said I would have to go back to B's writing to answer more definitively. The question was about who or what determines consecration and the vehicles/agents of it.

Interestingly enough, in *Distinction* there is actually not an index item for "consecration". [NB. this is a rough guide way of considering the matter--but not authoritative since the translator or indexer may have made decisions that obscure the matter.] In *The Field of Cultural Production* the index lists numerous references to consecration, as well as related terms. *The Rules of Art* has fewer index entries, but the concept is amply represented.

On p. 26 of *Distinction*, B talks about legitimacy and how it is established. Largely, he indicates this is through education (both formal, schooling, and informally by things being put in the position of being recognizable as legitimate). He also indicates that we recognize in the objects, something already known. (He then uses the example of gaining cinema educational capital vs. cinema-going. (this section is worth re-reading).

An example to think about here would be the board game of Trivial Pursuit, which itself resembles some TV game shows like *Jeopardy* or *Wheel of Fortune*, which call for specific recall of otherwise transient or insignificant information. (Albert Einstein, asked about how he kept so much knowledge in his head, once remarked that he only tried to remember things that he couldn't look up in a book--I suppose today he'd say things he couldn't google.) On the other hand, clearly there is some kind of pleasure (which I've never experienced directly) in the propensity for baseball fans to accumulate vast statistical knowledge. But extensive knowledge about pop culture (who played what role in old TV shows, for example) has relatively little other use than for playing such games, unless you are a TV historian.

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, 120-125. B. discusses the field of restricted production as involving those institutions that produce cultural. Thus some institutions conserve culture (museums, cinemathèques, etc.) while others ensure cultural reproduction through education: "...the reproduction of agents imbued with the categories of action, expression, conception, imagination, perception, specific to the 'cultivated disposition'." (p. 121)[see also the key footnote here]

Li's particular concern is the situation of Sixth Generation directors and Fifth Generation directors. In *Rules*, p. 224, B makes the important point that while there is an attempt to create a monopoly of consecration, in point of fact when the basic category is in dispute, this is evidence that the struggle over definitions is itself part of the reality the investigator is examining.

In terms of his analysis in *Rules*, there is an actual historical development of new social categories and strata in 19C France which creates "writers." That is, the net effect of the change from feudalism to capitalism, the change from a royal government to a form of

representative democracy, the change from a rural to urban base, the expansion of productive forces through industrialization, etc (the combination of things we can call “modernity”), the increase in literacy, the availability of inexpensive newspapers, etc. creates “readers” but also helps create people who can make a living as “writers” --thus journalists in particular, but also dramatists, song writers, and so forth come into existence in a previously unknown way. We might remember the spectacularly successful 19c Parisian dramatist Eugène Scribe, who created the “well made play” formula (which is, not so incidentally, the basis of the 20C classical narrative cinema screenplay), would actually sketch out a treatment, and then turn it over to a cadre of assistants who actually wrote the play, and then brought it back for his final edit. Such industrial production on the stage, was perfectly set up for transfer to film. Thus the standard handbooks of screenwriting simply continue this highly formulaic practice.

But B also reminds us that the very contention about what is consecrated and not, about the category of who is an artist or writer and who isn’t, is part of what we study in the historical field. Thus, the struggle about the boundaries of the group and conditions of membership is by no means abstract: the reality of all cultural production, and the very idea of the writer, may find themselves radically transformed by the sole fact of an enlargement of the ensemble of people who have their say on literary things.” [*Rules*, 224]

Certainly we witnessed this in the contestation over the literary canon when African American, Latino, Native American, feminist, queer, and other critics insisted on reconsidering the canon. And the intensity of the resistance to expanding the field shows as well what is at stake in terms of the field of power and politics. (In the US in the 80s and early 90s, much of this was wrapped in the extremely conservative activities of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in particular the personality of its head, Lynne Cheney [today the wife of the Vice President]. Similarly, the issue of who is a consecrated filmmaker (at the heart of Meredith’s analysis) itself goes through forms of contestation, both within the auteur theory rankings, or the current redefinition of the field represented by Jeff Sconce’s work on paracinema, the extremely low culture exploitation cinema.

The question Li is investigating is especially interesting because both the Fifth Generation and the Sixth Generation have been consecrated in large part because of reception abroad. And because as an industrial art, cinema requires very large amounts of capital. While “anyone” can write poetry, and even get it published at least in small circulation, hardly any one could actually self-finance a professional quality feature length film production. Thus the state, in China, can control economic resources as well as have censorship control over distribution and exhibition.

Further complication in France. The state directly intervenes in consecrating culture (e.g., the French Academy, an institution with no parallel in the US, which is empowered by the state to set all kinds of standards in areas of art, language usage, etc.). In fact the US is one of the few nations to not have a ministry of culture. In *Field*, p. 122 B points out that once established as the arbiter of matters cultural, the Academy at key moments

needed to declare some cultural producers out-of-bounds, heretics who would not be granted consecrated status. This very act then established the outcasts as important. Much the same phenomenon can be seen in, for example, the controversy around Robert Mapplethorpe's work. Criticized in Congress and elsewhere for an exhibition at the Corcoran which involved some federal funds, Mapplethorpe's work suddenly attained a national celebrity. His actual reputation to that point in fine art photography circles was as a fairly mediocre and often middlebrow talent following in a fairly derivative pattern (pale imitations of Edward Weston) with occasional provocations in terms of subject matter (images of SM subjects, hunky Black men and their penises, interracial embraces, etc. presented in a stylized conventionally "beautiful" way). Once denounced, many in the art world felt compelled to come to his defense, thus upping his reputation.

Thus controversy itself becomes a badge of honor and turns into cultural capital in the provocative avant garde. (This is a rather long-standing practice in some areas: e.g., in France the stage premiere of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* in the 1830s created a riot among warring factions of supporters and denigrators; subsequent avant gardists have sought similar reactions.)

Also pertinent: Fowler, Bridget. *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations*. London: Sage, 1997. Chapter 4, "The Historical Genesis of Bourdieu's Cultural Theory," pp.85-102. (particularly the section on consecration outside of France)